ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
11/17/78

Panel May Conclude Ray Murdered Dr. King Expecting To Get $50,000 From St. Louisan

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WASHINGTON — After all the witnesses have been heard and all the evidence analyzed and digested, the House Select Committee on Assassinations is expected to conclude that James Earl Ray killed the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King for money — $50,000 that he never collected from a right-wing St. Louis businessman who wanted the civil rights leader slain.

And the committee is expected to decide that the Federal Bureau of Investigation botched the case, apparently ignoring the possiblity of conspiracy in the assassination and concentrating on the identification and apprehension of a fugitive. In the process, valuable time and evidence was lost, important figures never were interviewed and information was disregarded, if not hidden.

Even though the committee is conducting hearings to build the public record, its investigation is virtually completed allowing it to arrive at several conclusions.

That picture can be drawn on the basis of interviews with committee members, witnesses and congressional staff officials.

According to the committee's investigation and a separate investigation by The New York Times, the presence of a standing $50,000 offer was well known in the St. Louis area in 1967 and 1968 and probably had been reported to federal authorities prior to King's murder.

The two investigations have produced the following scenario as the most likely way the lives of two men collided in the cross-hairs of political assassination.

On July 13, 1967, about three months after Ray escaped from the Missouri State Penitentary, he and perhaps his two brothers robbed a bank in Alton, Ill., and took $27,000.

Ray's split of the proceeds, and the money he accumulated through odd jobs and other robberies he has publicly acknowledged, would have been sufficient to finance his adventures and expenditures from the time he left prison until he was captured at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8, 1968.

From the prison escape on April 23, 1967, until the bank robbery on July 13, Ray adhered pretty much to his familiar lifestyle of rooming-house beds and beanery bowls. There were stints as a dishwasher and food server.

But the day after the bank robbery, July 14, he turned up in Montreal, signed a six-month lease on an apartment, bought $250 worth of new clothes and vacationed at a fashionable Canadian ski resort.

He later traveled to Mexico and California, reverting to his old pattern by spending an average of $3 a day for food and $4 a day for lodging.

While Ray was on the run, a prominent patent attorney in St. Louis was looking for someone to assassinate King.

A former St. Louis auto parts dealer named Russell G. Byers has said that he was approached sometime in late 1966 or early 1967 by a business associate, John R. Kauffmann, who invited him to a meeting with the patent attorney, John H. Sutherland.

Sutherland, a member of the conservative Southern States Industrial Council and a leader of the White Citizen's Council of St. Louis, told Byers that a group of businessmen would pay $50,000 for the murder of King, according to Byers.

Byers said that he declined the offer. The other two men are now dead.

Both Kauffmann and Sutherland were members of the American Independent Party and were active supporters of Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace whose campaign office in St. Louis in 1968 was located in a house across the street from a tavern operated by Ray's brother John. The license was held by Ray's sister, Carole Pepper, from November 1967 to December 1968.

The Ray Brothers were avid Wallace supporters and the tavern became virtually a Wallace headquarters annex, filled with buttons, bumper stickers, posters and pictures.